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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 003855

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI AND INR/B

STATE PASS TO USTR FOR DOUG BELL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/26/14
TAGS: PINR PGOV TC
SUBJECT: Ruling family projects normalcy and stability in
face of Zayed's precarious health

Ref: Abu Dhabi 3410

(U) Classified by Richard A. Albright, Charge d'Affaires,
a.i., reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: UAE President Sheikh Zayed is critically ill, but his demise may not be imminent. The country's leaders are extremely sensitive about the issue of his health, reacting very negatively when the subject is broached. Meanwhile, rumors about Zayed's precarious health, and others about his demise, and often wild speculation about alternative succession scenarios, continue unabated. The UAEG has decided not to issue a statement to dispel the rumors because it believes that doing so would only stir up more rumors, an advisor to the Minister of Information and Culture Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed (AbZ) told us. For their part, the ruling families of the seven Emirates are making a show of normalcy, demonstrating their strong ties with one another with prominently publicized Ramadan visits. When Sheikh Zayed passes away, we expect a stable transition, with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed becoming Abu Dhabi's next Ruler and UAE President, and Abu Dhabi Deputy Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed becoming the next Crown Prince. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The UAE began the month of Ramadan amid rumors that Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the President of the UAE since it became a federation in 1971, had either passed

away, or had slipped into a coma. Sheikh Zayed is reported to be on life support. Sheikh Abdullah told the French Ambassador in early October that Sheikh Zayed's health was "stable," without getting drawn out on his prognosis. There are rumors that he has liver cancer.

¶3. (C) Emboffs hear the rumors at cocktail receptions, private dinners, coffee shops, sports events, and in the hallways of the Embassy. Asked if Emiratis are hearing the same rumors as expatriates, UAE University political science professor Ebtisam Al Kitbi pulled out her mobile phone and said, "We're sending each other text messages all the time. It's like a favorite pastime." Without any official confirmation one way or the other of Zayed's health status, all of us are left to watching and listening for tell-tale signs or hints. For example, when people see official government vehicles speeding up the freeway from Abu Dhabi to Al Ain, some jump to the conclusion that means the ruling family is gathering around the patriarch's deathbed to bid him farewell.

Rumors began after UAE gave up GCC summit

¶4. (C) The rumors began in earnest in September when the government announced that the Kingdom of Bahrain had asked, and the UAEG had concurred, to host the GCC summit in December 2004. The summit was to have been held in a magnificent new hotel being built on the Abu Dhabi Corniche. Abu Dhabi also was in the process of sprucing up miles of highways and boulevards linking the international airport and the hotel/convention center. Without further official explanation for the change in venue for the GCC summit, rumors began circulating that Sheikh Zayed was close to death and would not be able to greet fellow GCC leaders. Bahrain's Crown Prince told the President's counter terrorism advisor, Fran Townsend, on Sept. 15 that the change in venue was related to Sheikh Zayed's poor health. Others said that the conference center and related road and infrastructure projects had fallen behind schedule. A media advisor to Information and Culture Minister Sheikh Abdullah told Polchief at the time of the decision that even he did not know the real reason behind the decision.

¶5. (C) The rumor mill had been put in motion and has been active since. The same advisor to Sheikh Abdullah told Polchief on Oct. 24 that there was talk within the UAEG of issuing a statement regarding Sheikh Zayed's state of health, but that they refrained from doing so because they think that would only stir up more rumors. "People will think we're trying to hide something," he said. The Al Nahyan family, rulers of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, is taking all of this very well, the advisor added. The rulers have been making numerous public appearances during Ramadan, including paying visits to one another to exchange holiday greetings, and attendance at an important international conference on Islam in Abu Dhabi. They have met with several USG officials during this period, including USTR Zoellick and A/S for Political-Military Affairs Bloomfield, giving them the impression of business as usual.

Stratfor report riles UAEG

¶6. (C) While the UAEG has not issued a single public statement about the health of the President or the succession implications, Information and Culture Ministry advisors have told Emboffs privately that a recent report on the UAE succession by the Texas-based Strategic Forecasting is completely unfounded. The report, published on the Internet, suggests as a possibility that Abu Dhabi Deputy Crown Prince and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) might "buy" the presidency from Khalifa (who is reportedly less well-off than MbZ) in exchange for some other political and economic benefits. Our Ministry of Information contacts told us such a

suggestion is ridiculous given that it is Khalifa who holds Abu Dhabi's purse strings, citing the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority in particular. Khalifa also controls several major businesses and a vast investment portfolio.

(Comment: If anyone is "less well-off," and that can only be a very relative term among the Al Nahyan, it would be MBZ and the other five Bani Fatima (the six sons of Zayed by his current wife Fatima), whose business interests are far more limited.)

¶7. (C) The same report suggests that the "well-loved and widely respected" Sultan bin Zayed could become the Ruler of Abu Dhabi and then President, with Mohammed bin Zayed as the real power behind the throne. (Comment: Sheikh Sultan may be well-loved among some Abu Dhabi tribes, but widely respected stretches plausibility.) As we have noted in reftel, Sultan has had periodic bouts with substance abuse and gained notoriety for his mismanagement of funds for high-profile projects. The report also even suggests that Dubai, or possibly Sultan Al Qassimi, the Ruler of the Emirate of Sharjah, might make a surprise bid for the presidency, something we view as equally unlikely. Abu Dhabi's status as the wealthiest, most populous, and largest Emirate, and its conscious effort to distribute its wealth across the other Emirates make a challenge to its hold on the presidency unlikely. From what we know from our contacts, the Abu Dhabi-Dubai relationship is strong, cemented by the solid relationship of Mohammed Bin Zayed and Mohammed Bin Rashid. If newspaper photos are any indication and they often are here he press this week showed a smiling Mohammed Bin Rashid hosting a smiling Mohammed Bin Zayed at an Iftar dinner in Dubai, and a smiling Crown Prince Khalifa with a contented-looking Sheikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai, during an exchange of Ramadan greetings in Abu Dhabi. Stratfor cites one other "remote possibility" for president: Sheikh Zayed's grandson (the report mentions only that he has been schooled in the West). No one we know of has ever suggested such an option, and we seriously doubt the Emirati leadership would even contemplate it. One of the things that bothers the UAEG about all this wild speculation is that Stratfor's clients include Fortune 500 companies and major government agencies.

¶8. (C) As we have reported before (see reftel), Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Khalifa is set to become Ruler of Abu Dhabi when his father passes away. We have never heard of any suggestion otherwise from anyone here. Nor have we heard any suggestion that the UAE Supreme Council, comprised of the Rulers of the seven Emirates, would elect the ruler of any other Emirate as President.

Comment:

¶9. (C) It is apparent that Sheikh Zayed is critically ill, likely on life support, and possibly suffering from terminal cancer. How long he will survive remains a matter of constant conjecture. Another constant is that the ruling family is not talking, but doing everything possible to project normalcy. When Sheikh Zayed passes on, we expect a smooth transition with Khalifa's election occurring without delay.

ALBRIGHT